

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION



GAULER TWIN HOUSES

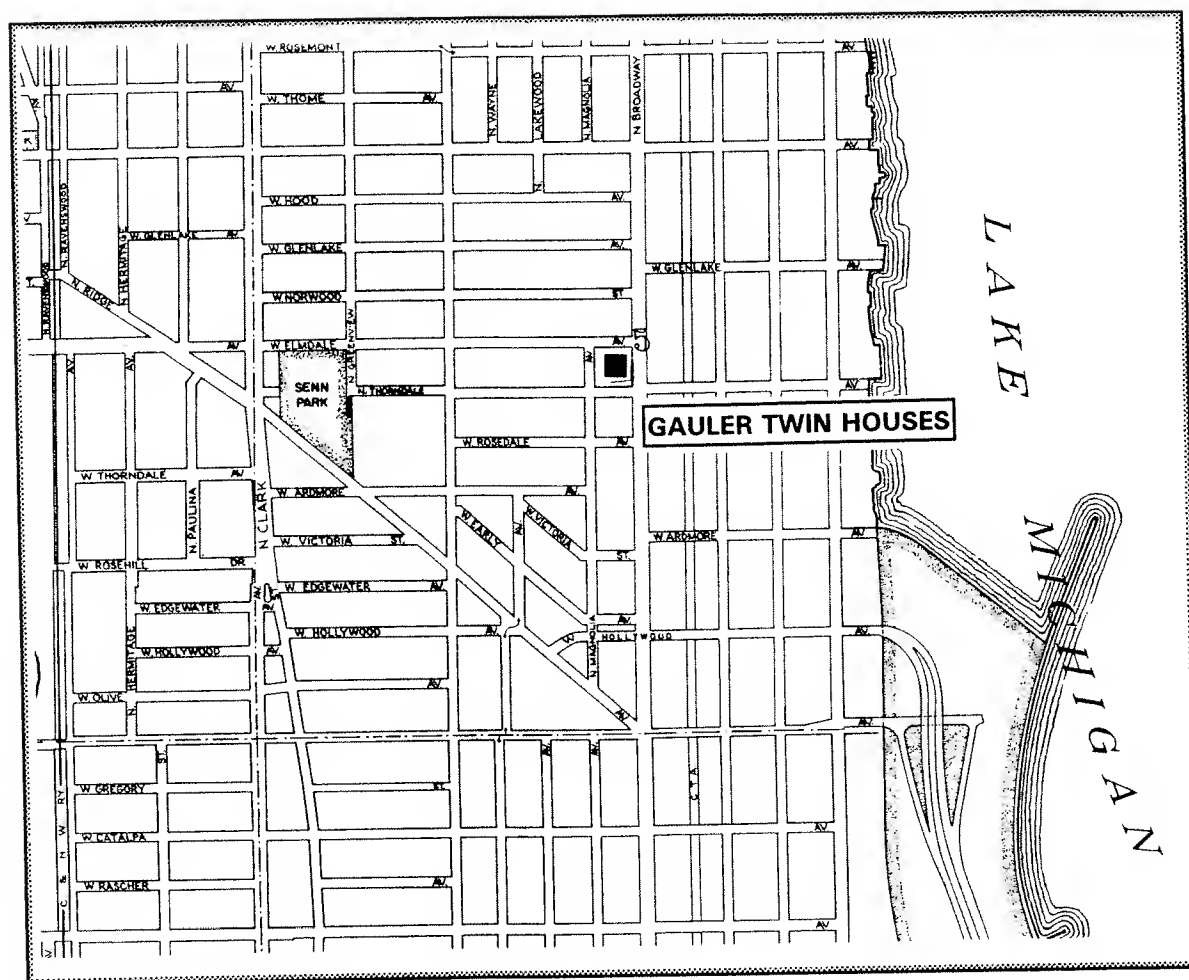
5917 AND 5921 N. MAGNOLIA AVENUE

SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS IN FEBRUARY 2000



**CITY OF CHICAGO
RICHARD M. DALEY, MAYOR**

**DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT
CHRISTOPHER R. HILL, COMMISSIONER**



GAULER TWIN HOUSES

5917 AND 5921 N. MAGNOLIA AVE.

ARCHITECT: WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN
DATE: 1908

Built as speculative housing, these residences are a rare example of a *twin* Prairie-style design. Their architect, Walter Burley Griffin, is internationally recognized for his distinctive designs, as well as his contributions to the field of "land planning." The vertical composition of these houses was a hallmark of Griffin's work and demonstrates his skill in adapting Prairie-style principles to a relatively small urban site.

Located in the Edgewater neighborhood on the city's North Side, the houses were built in 1908 by John Gauler, who was a butcher by trade. The first owners were Henry C. and Mary Jones (at 5917 N. Magnolia Ave.) and preacher George Elliot (at 5921 N. Magnolia Ave.).

They were designed by the 32-year-old Griffin, who had recently left the employ of Frank Lloyd Wright to start his own architectural practice. Rather than treating the two houses as independent structures, Griffin created them as mirrored images of one another. In doing so, he was able to optimize the available lot space (67 feet wide) and have the twin houses share a common center walkway. The main entrances are located at the sides of the houses.

The two-story structures were constructed on a stucco-finished wood frame for \$4,000 each. Their blockish forms feature low hipped roofs, overhanging eaves, and massive piers that support one-story enclosed front sun porches. The strongly geometric lines of the houses are accented with rough-hewn, dark-stained wood trim.

Although located on a narrow street lined with typical Chicago apartment flats and single-family homes, the strikingly modern-looking Gauler houses were in keeping with the scale, massing, and setbacks of the surrounding streetscape. The majority of the buildings on the block, including the Gauler houses, are on 33 ½ x 125 foot lots. Most have a front stoop or sun porch that projects in front of the main mass of the building, leaving a 15-foot deep front yard. The main mass of the Gauler

Above: Map showing location of the Gauler Twin Houses in the north side Edgewater neighborhood.

Cover: The Gauler Twin Houses, 1999.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance recommended to City Council should be regarded as final.

houses line up with these adjacent structures, and they are physically joined, at their rear, by an overhead wooden beam.

The interior plans and finishes of the houses are consistent with the Prairie style. The plans of the first floors are very spacious, with the living and dining rooms set at right angles to one another around a large brick fireplace that is open to both rooms. The plaster walls and ceiling of the first-floor rooms are highlighted with strips of dark-stained wood. A decorative wood screen masks the staircase which is located at the side of the floor plan.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary and final recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Gauler Twin Houses be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.

The Gauler Twin Houses are an excellent example of the world-famous Prairie style of architecture, which was pioneered in Chicago during the late-1890s and early-1900s.

According to architect Frank Lloyd Wright, the Prairie style was developed as "a modern architecture for a democratic American society," which was a goal espoused by many progressive architects at the turn of the last century. In an architectural age dominated by popular revival styles, Prairie-style designs were innovative, high-quality, and free of any historical precedents. The resultant buildings brought international acclaim to their architects and to the Chicago region, where many Prairie-style designs can be found.

Common characteristics of the Prairie style include:

- strongly horizontal lines,
- brick or stucco walls, usually outlined with wooden strips of contrasting color,
- low-pitched, usually hipped-style roofs with broad overhanging eaves,



THE PRAIRIE-STYLE ARCHITECTURE OF THE GAULER TWIN HOUSES IS IN MARKED CONTRAST TO NEIGHBORING THREE-FLATS OF THE SAME PERIOD. THEIR DISTINCTIVE FEATURES INCLUDE DEEP OVERHANGING EAVES, RIBBONS OF WINDOWS, AND ROUGH-TEXTURED STUCCO WALLS.

- corner windows and partially hidden, off-centered entries,
- projecting single-story wings or sun porches with massive piers, and
- windows with abstract geometric ornament.

The Gauler Twin Houses are a classic study in Prairie-style design. They feature low-hipped roofs with broad overhanging eaves, as well as projecting, single-story sun porches with massive piers. Wraparound windows are at the corners of the houses, while their main entrances—located across a common walkway from one another—are hidden from the street.

They feature excellent detailing, especially in their use of simple materials—a characteristic of Griffin's work. The buildings' stucco walls are accented with rough-hewn, dark wood trim, and the windows are delicately mullioned with an abstract, rectilinear pattern.

The Gauler Twin Houses are a rare example of the Prairie style of architecture being adapted to a narrow urban lot.

The vast majority of Prairie-style residences are located on spacious lots, surrounded by large front and side yards. Even the smallest of the Prairie-style designs were set on lots of at least 50- or 60-feet wide. Often the houses were sited with their long axes parallel to the street, in order to give them a strongly horizontal emphasis.

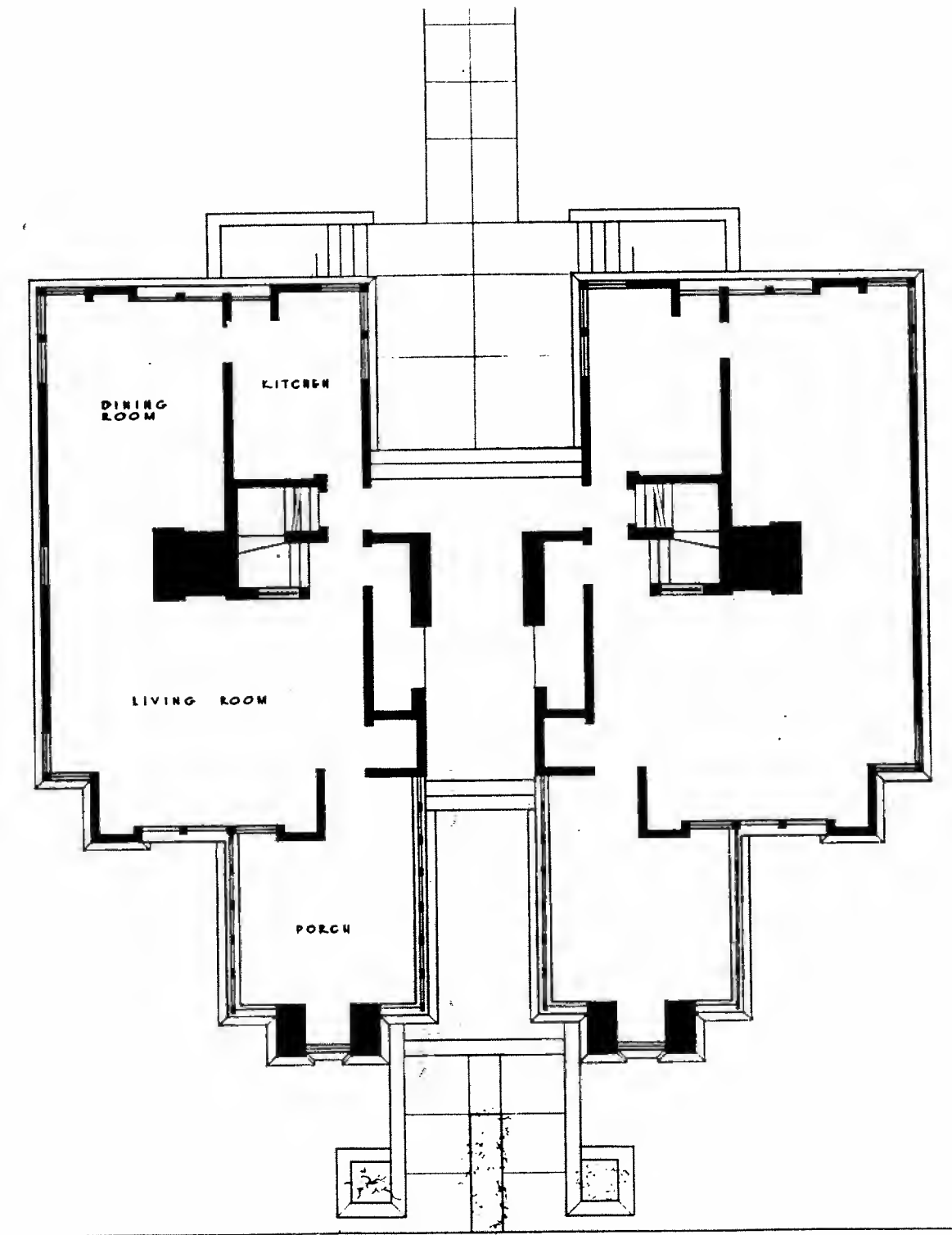
However, in the case of the Gauler Twin Houses, each lot is only 33 feet in width—consistent with the standard platting of most Chicago residential lots. Griffin's solution to this challenge provides an ingenious example of creative site planning and design. Here, he oriented the long axes of the houses perpendicular to the street and his skillful arrangement of their cubic forms gives the designs a strong visual impact.

In addition to slightly reducing the size of the houses, he clustered them around a shared entrance walkway. By doing so, he was able to create a larger space *between* the houses, while leaving a narrow side yard on the other side of each house. As a result, the modestly-scaled Gauler Twin Houses convey a sense of light and space that the neighboring buildings—which tend to dominate their lots—lack.

Although the front yards of the houses are slightly smaller than those of their neighbors (due to projecting sun porches), the effect is diminished because the main masses of the buildings are flush with those of their neighbors. Yet, because of the strongly geometric and distinctive designs of the twin houses, they generate a visual sense of scale and mass much larger than their actual narrow widths seemingly would warrant.



BY CREATING A SHARED CENTRAL WALKWAY, GRIFFIN WAS ABLE TO PROVIDE THE TWIN RESIDENCES WITH AN UNUSUALLY LARGE AMOUNT OF LIGHT AND AIR, GIVEN THEIR NARROW URBAN LOTS. THE BUILDING ENTRANCES ARE LOCATED OFF OF THE CENTRAL LANDING.



THE FLOOR PLANS OF THE GAULER TWIN HOUSES ARE MIRROR IMAGES OF ONE ANOTHER. THEY DO AWAY WITH MOST OF THE TRADITIONAL WALLING OFF OF ROOMS, MINIMALLY DIVIDING THE SPACES WITH A CENTRAL FIREPLACE AND STAIRS. THIS WAS AN EARLY USE OF THE "OPEN PLAN," WHICH BECAME AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF PRAIRIE-STYLE DESIGNS.

The Gauler Twin Houses are a unique example of a "paired" Prairie-style designs.

By definition, most Prairie-style residences were individualistic designs, commissioned by a specific client and intended to be viewed within a broad landscape that emphasized their uniqueness. Duplicate designs of the period were generally found in common speculative-type housing, where a contractor was able to sell multiple copies of the same design.

Walter Burley Griffin's practice, however, was unusual for a Prairie-style architect, in that he often worked with real-estate developers and contractors on designs for speculative housing. According to one of his biographers, architectural historian Donald Leslie Johnson, it was this direct relationship with developers that enabled Griffin to create plans for duplicate designs, including paired houses and groups of houses.

Unlike the often-complex and asymmetrical plans of such Prairie-style architects as Frank Lloyd Wright, Griffin's designs usually are symmetrical in their composition, perhaps owing to his academic training at the University of Illinois. According to architectural historian Paul Kruty, it was this interest in "symmetrical balance" that likely led Griffin to create one of the most distinctive design types of his practice: sets of paired houses that are mirror images of one another. Kruty notes in *Walter Burley Griffin in America* (1996) that:

In the Gauler houses and the Orth houses the individual buildings are picturesquely disposed, their plans composed of asymmetrical, interlocking space; yet the composition as a whole is centered along a main axis set between them.

The Orth Twin Houses (1909), 38 and 42 Abbottsford Road in Winnetka, Ill., were built a year after the Gauler houses. They are very similar in design to the Gauler houses, although the larger Orth houses cost \$6,000 each (compared to \$4,000 for the Gauler houses). Unlike the Gauler houses, the Orth houses do not share a common walk and, because of their larger lots, the Orth houses are located considerably farther apart than the Gauler houses. As a result, both the similarity of the Orth houses and their "twin effect" are considerably diminished.

Griffin designed other paired residences, including the Comstock Houses in Evanston, Ill. (1912; Church Street and Ashland Avenue) and the Itte Houses on Morse Avenue in Chicago (built 1910; demolished c.1960). Both of these groupings feature two different house designs that are unified by their landscaped setting.

The open-style plan used in the Gauler Twin Houses is widely recognized as an important Prairie-style innovation to modern architecture.

The ground floors of the Gauler houses are largely open in plan, centering on a central fireplace and staircase. According to architectural historian H. Allen Brooks, this type of plan was important for the amount of interior space it provided on a compact lot. Brooks notes in his book, *The Prairie School* (1972), that the “open plan:”

... vanquished the compartmentalized interior by integrating the living and dining rooms as a single L-shaped space which pivoted around a central fireplace. ... It was compact and economical to maintain and build. It required little land and its orientation was readily changed.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright popularized this type of plan with his design for an inexpensive “fireproof house” that appeared in a *Ladies Home Journal* article in April 1907. However, Paul Kruty says “the evidence strongly suggests that [the plan] was the brain-child of Griffin,” noting that this type of floor plan was first used by Griffin in 1906—a year before Wright’s plan—for the design of the Peters House (4731 N. Knox Ave.) in Chicago. Also, according to Kruty, the open plan was rarely used by Wright in his subsequent designs, whereas it became a staple of Griffin’s works.

The open plan soon became a standard feature of many other single-family American residences for generations, whether they were designed by other prominent architects of the Prairie movement or used by builders who recognized its value and incorporated it into stock plans for mass-produced houses.

Criterion 5: Significant Architect

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois or the United States.

Walter Burley Griffin, who designed the Gauler Houses, played an instrumental role in developing and advancing the world-renowned Prairie style of architecture.

Raised in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) studied architecture and landscape design at the University of Illinois. In 1901, he joined Frank Lloyd Wright’s studio, where he became the office manager and construction supervisor for many of Wright’s projects.



WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN WAS ONE OF THE MOST INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN AND APPRECIATED ARCHITECTS OF THE EARLY-20TH CENTURY. HIS WORK HAS BEEN COMMEMORATED BY AN AUSTRALIAN POSTAGE STAMP (TOP) AND BY THE RENAMING OF WEST 104TH PLACE IN CHICAGO—WHICH FEATURES SEVEN OF HIS HOUSES—AS WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN PLACE.



THESE TWO DESIGNS ARE EMBLEMATIC OF THE WORK OF WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN. SOARING TENT-LIKE GABLES AND MASSIVE CORNER PIERS ARE PROMINENT FEATURES OF THE EMERY HOUSE (TOP) IN ELMHURST, ILL., WHEREAS THE MELSON HOUSE (ABOVE) IN MASON CITY, IOWA, MAKES USES OF NATIVE STONE THAT INTEGRATES THE BUILDING INTO ITS ROCKY SITE.

Architectural historian H. Allen Brooks recognized Griffin's importance to the studio, describing him as "a useful critic, a lens through which Wright could re-examine his own ideas." While with Wright, Griffin helped with the designs of a number of significant residential and commercial commissions, including the:

- Huertley House, Oak Park (designed in 1902);
- Larkin Administration Building, Buffalo, N.Y. (1903; demolished 1950);
- Tomek House, Riverside (1904); and
- Unity Temple, Oak Park (1904).

After five years with Wright, Griffin established his own architecture practice, where he quickly developed a distinctive design style. Some of the features were based on project elements that he worked on with Wright, such as the use of large, projecting corner piers and bands of windows just beneath the roof eaves.

However, unlike Wright, whose designs usually featured low, horizontal silhouettes, Griffin emphasized verticality in his designs. Many of his residences, for example, have tent-like gable roofs with very deep eaves that combine to give a strongly vertical emphasis to their compositions.

In the case of the Gauler houses, however, Griffin used a different design technique to create this vertical orientation. Here, one-story sun porches are "pulled out" from the two-story, cubelike, main section of the houses. This stacking of forms gives the design of these houses a striking visual character.

Between 1906 and 1915, when Griffin relocated permanently to Australia, he completed over 100 designs, 75 of which were built. The great majority of his commissions were for residences in Chicago and its suburbs. Among the most notable designs of this period are the:

- Emery House, Elmhurst (1902);
- Moulton House, 1328 W. Sherwin Ave., Chicago (1908);
- Cooley House, Monroe, Louisiana (1908);
- Carter House, Evanston (1910);
- Tolles House, 10561 S. Longwood Dr., Chicago (1911);
- Mess House, Winnetka (1912); and
- Melson House, Mason City, Iowa (1912).

Two of Griffin's more distinctive non-residential projects of this period were for the Stinson Memorial Library (1913) in far downstate Anna, Illinois, and the Cornell Store and Flats (1912), 1220 E. 75th St., in Chicago. By 1912, Griffin had gained a national reputation through the publication of his innovative

designs in such magazines as: *Architectural Record*, *House and Garden*, and *Country Life in America*. An entire issue (August 1913) of the *Western Architect* was devoted to Griffin's work.

Griffin spent the last 20 years of his life in Australia and India, where he designed more than 100 buildings and dozens of other projects. Most of these were residences, although he also designed a movie palace in Melbourne, Australia (1921-24), a newspaper plant in Lucknow, India (1935), and a series of 12 highly innovative designs for the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company in Sydney and Melbourne (1929-37).

During this period, Griffin moved away from the stucco and wood frame construction of his early designs toward masonry materials that were more in keeping with the native landscapes of Australia and India. These designs included blocky sandstone structures, poured concrete forms, and prefabricated “knitlock” blocks—the latter invention being contemporary with Frank Lloyd Wright’s famed textile block designs of the 1920s.

Cast in the enormous shadow of Wright, however, the accomplishments of Walter Burley Griffin are often overlooked. Yet, as architectural historian Paul Kruty has stated:

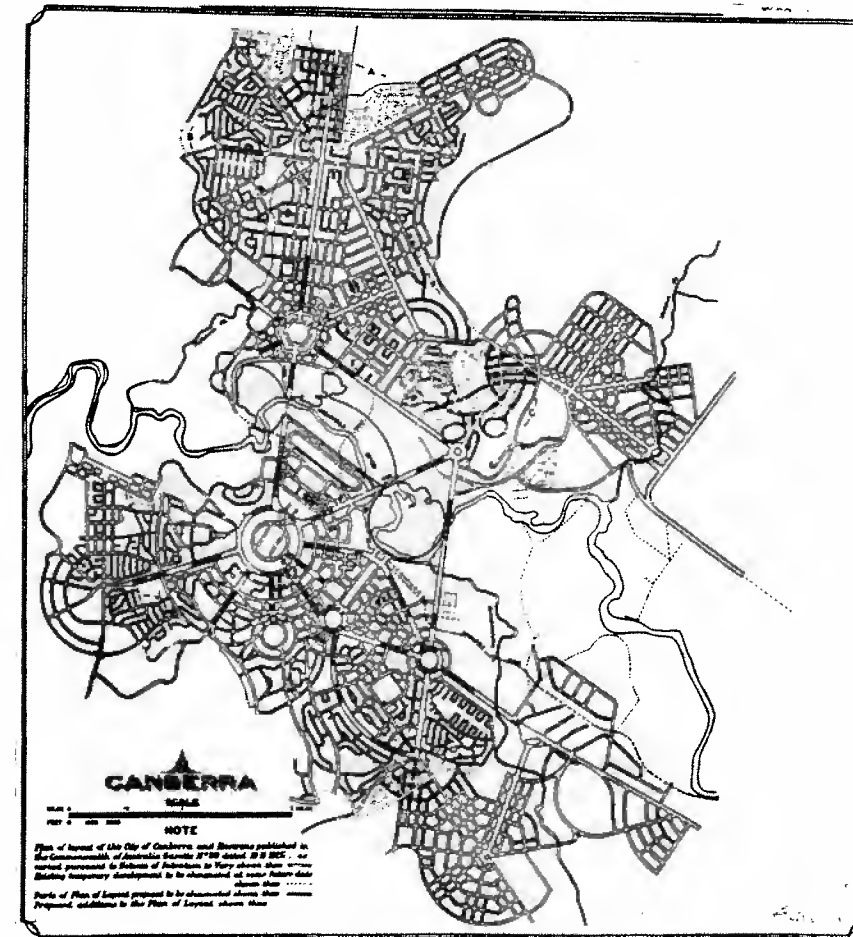
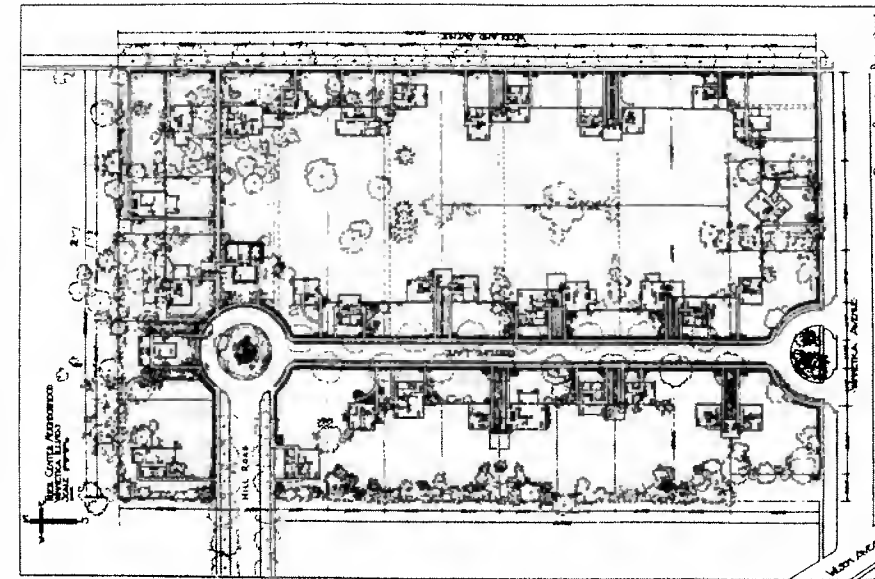
His whole career was defined by a unity of purpose. Griffin never wavered from his goal of creating an organic, decorated architecture for the twentieth century. Of all the architects of the Prairie School who were practicing at the turn of the century, only three stayed loyal to their ideals and fought to their dying days for their personal visions of modern architecture. Two of them—Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright—have been immortalized among the legion of great architects. It is time to accord Walter Burley Griffin a place near them.

Walter Burley Griffin was an important early “land planner,” whose projects ranged from small multiple-property developments in Chicago to the master plan for the capital of Australia. The Gauler Twin Houses are an early example of Griffin’s site planning efforts.

Landscape design and site planning were essential elements of Griffin's work. For many of his single-family houses Griffin designed elegant landscapes, but his planning skills, especially for the many multiple-houses projects with which he was involved, frequently addressed larger siting and streetscape concerns.

“Land planning” was a relatively new discipline when Griffin opened his own architectural practice in 1906. However, his extensive work with real estate developers and contractors quickly gave Griffin the opportunity to design multiple, single-family-house developments.

Developer William Temple, who loaned the money to John Gauler for the construction of the Gauler Twin Houses,



IN ADDITION TO HIS IMPACT AS A PRAIRIE-STYLE ARCHITECT, GRIFFIN WAS AN EARLY AND IMPORTANT LAND PLANNER. SITE DESIGN PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ALL OF HIS WORK, WHETHER FOR THE GAULER TWIN HOUSES SITE, THE TRIER CENTER SUBDIVISION IN WINNETKA, ILL. (TOP), OR THE MASTER PLAN FOR CANBERRA, THE CAPITAL OF AUSTRALIA (ABOVE).

commissioned Griffin on a number of projects. Another frequent client was developer Russell Blount, who commissioned the largest collection of Griffin's designs in Chicago: 12 residences built between 1909 and 1913 in the Beverly neighborhood, including seven in the Walter Burley Griffin (West 104th) Place District.

Other important, early land planning projects by Griffin were: the Rock Glen subdivision in Mason City, Iowa (1910-16), for which he designed several houses as well as the overall layout surrounding a rock-lined ravine, and the Trier Center subdivision in Winnetka, Illinois (1912-13), which included a partially executed plan for a 35-house development.

Griffin's career as a land planner, however, was highlighted in 1912, when he won an international competition to design Australia's new capital of Canberra. Griffin's plan, which was influenced by the English "garden city" movement, called for a separation between governmental, civic, residential, and commercial functions. It also featured a strong landscape emphasis, both in the preservation of the site's distinctive topography and native vegetation.

Griffin and his wife and partner, noted landscape architect Marion Mahony Griffin, moved to Australia in 1915 to supervise construction of the master plan. However, work was stopped by World War I and, following disputes between the architect and the prime minister, Griffin left the project in 1921. Nonetheless, important elements of Griffin's plan were ultimately carried out, including the creation of an "ornamental waterway" in 1963 (now called Lake Burley Griffin) and the construction of the country's parliamentary complex in the 1980s.

Among Griffin's other large-scale land planning projects:

- Newman College, a campus quadrangle at the University of Melbourne, Australia (1915);
- Castlecrag, a 90-acre subdivision outside Sydney, Australia (1919-1935), that included 21 Griffin-designed residences;
- University of Lucknow, India, campus plan (1935-36); and
- United Provinces Exhibition of Industry and Agriculture master plan, Lucknow, India (1936).

Reflecting on his land planning work Griffin referred to these projects as "experiments directed toward attaining greater unity in our use and administration of the land." The success of his experiments has been widely recognized. In 1934, Griffin was elected to the council of a newly-formed Town and Country Planning Institute and an Australian postage stamp was issued in his honor in 1963.

According to Griffin's biography in *Contemporary Architects*, an encyclopedia of the world's foremost architects:

[His] outstanding contribution lies in the relationship of buildings to other buildings, in forming building clusters; and of buildings to landscape, in binding all the elements of the neighborhood or city in a semi-mystical union with nature. . . . In his concern for ecology and preservation of the natural environment Griffin was far ahead of his time and anticipated many of the principles in such matters that only came to the fore in the 1960s.

Integrity

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The Gauler Twin Houses retain a remarkable degree of integrity. The only notable changes from the original are:

5917 N. Magnolia Ave.

- The second-story window opening on the north facade, which provides light to a stair hall, has been expanded and filled with glass block. A narrow, glass block kitchen window has been added to the north facade and one window along the east facade has been replaced with glass block.
- The windows of the small porches on each corner of the rear (east) facade have been filled with glass block.
- A three-car stucco garage was added prior to the 1950s.

5921 N. Magnolia Ave.

- The original sun-porch windows (see 5917) have been replaced with divided-light wood casement sash, windows and the two dining room windows along the north wall were replaced with glass block prior to 1950.
- A portion of the front-yard curb north of the raised, square planter has been removed.
- The entrance, originally recessed (see 5917), is now flush with the south wall.
- The original garage was replaced c.1970.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Gauler Twin Houses, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- ▶ all exterior elevations and rooflines of the two houses; and
- ▶ all concrete landscape elements, including but not limited to, such features as the:
 - shared walkway and stairs between the houses;
 - raised, square front-yard planters; and
 - front-yard curb adjacent to the public walkway.

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THE REAR ELEVATIONS OF THE GAULER TWIN HOUSES ARE ALSO CAREFULLY CRAFTED PRAIRIE-STYLE COMPOSITIONS.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CITY OF CHICAGO

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

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Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

James Peters, Deputy Commissioner for Landmarks

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Illustrations

Ron Gordon for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: front cover, p. 2, inside back cover.

Mati Maldre from *Walter Burley Griffin in America* (1996): pp. 5, 10.

Prairie School Review (First Quarter, 1970): pp. 6, 16.

Prairie School Review (Third Quarter, 1970), p. 9 (top).

Barbara Crane for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: p. 9 (bot.).

The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin (1977): p. 13.



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